

Rhode Island State House
90 Smith Street
Providence
Providence County
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-155

HABS
RI
4-PROV
180-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
MID-ATLANTIC REGION NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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RHODE ISLAND STATE HOUSE

HABS No. RI-155

Location: 90 Smith Street, Providence, Providence
County, Rhode Island

Date of Construction: 1896-1898

Present Owner: State of Rhode Island

Present Use: State Capitol

Significance: The structure is important as the seat of Rhode Island's state government. It is also important as a monument to the art and taste of its era, as a dominant and handsome feature of the Providence cityscape, and as an example of the work of McKim, Mead and White, an important architectural firm at the turn of the century.

Project Information: The landscaping of the Rhode Island State House will be affected by the Northeast Corridor Improvement Project of the Federal Railroad Administration. Mitigative documentation prepared by Deleuw, Cather/Parsons, Washington D.C. for the U.S. Department of Transportation, September, 1983.

For overview history and bibliography, see PROVIDENCE COVE LANDS HAER No. RI-24.

Historical Information:

In 1892 the Public park Association recommended Smith's Hill (Cady 1957, 194) as the site for the new State House. The land was acquired by purchase or condemnation between 1894 and 1895. The State House Commission Board was very concerned with the siting of the structure as well as the architecture and in 1895 expressed its decision as follows:

On careful consideration and after visiting the grounds with the architects, your Board decided to obtain the balance of said area that the State House might stand on the top of the hill and that the State might control all within said streets thus preventing in the future the erection of other structures which would interfere with the view of the State House and detract from the dignity which should characterize such an ediface.

In all, a sixteen-acre tract was acquired for the grounds of the State House.

After a design competition in 1892, the firm of McKim, Mead and White of New York City was awarded the contract. Their design was realized as a large white marble Beaux Arts building consisting of one square central block, with a dome carried by a colonnaded drum flanked by four smaller cupolas at the corners of the central block. Long wings on either side are of the same height. The structure is set on a balustraded marble terrace overlooking the entire city center and Narragansett Bay. This terrace is 78 feet above sea level, the approximate height of Smith's Hill in 1835 before the soil was removed for filling the Great Salt Cove. Portions of the construction process and massive ground moving that was required can be seen on pages 6-7.

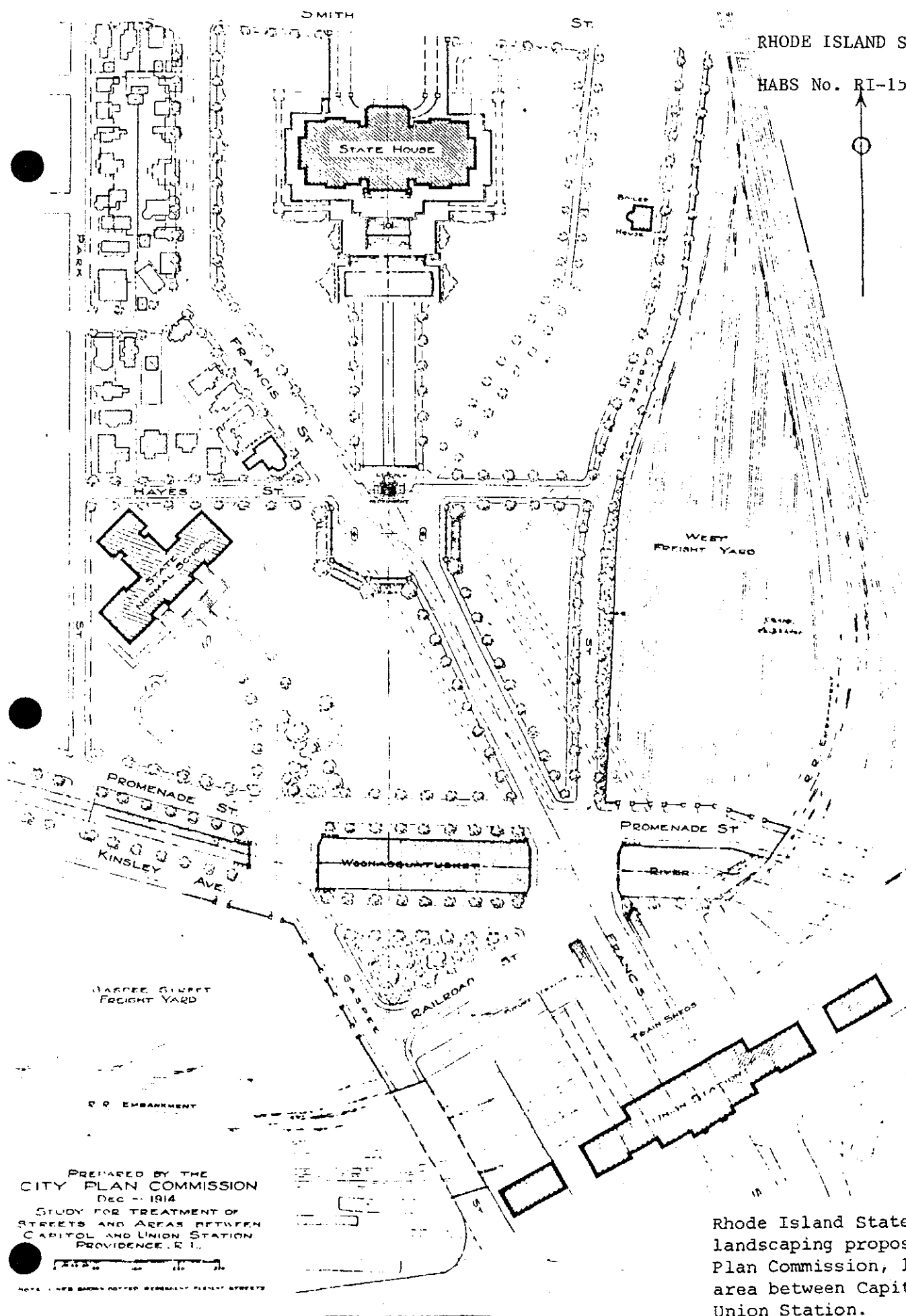
Landscaping of the State House grounds was a central concern to the city and state even before construction began, and during the early construction phases suggestions were made to improve the appearance of the site. On March 14, 1896, six months before groundbreaking, the Board of the State House Commission suggested

...that Executive Committee take into consideration the advisability of transplanting trees from Cove Lands to State House site...(and) that Executive Committee remove the disfiguring buildings from State House site.

McKim, Mead and White prepared several sketches and drawings for a proposed "Arrangement of Grounds around Rhode Island State House" (see Rhode Island State Archives), but it was not until 1904 that a plan by Manning Brothers of Boston was accepted and implemented in time for the delivery of the building, its terrace approaches and grounds completed, to the state on June 11, 1904.

The terraced grounds are landscaped simply to enhance the appearance of the State House and to permit an unobstructed view of the city from the south facade. At the base of the south steps is a red brick and white marble terrace leading to three parallel rows of brick walkways to Francis Street, intersected at a circle by two parallel walks leading to Gaspee Street and by another leading around the east side of the building to the parking lot and Smith Street. The north facade faces directly on Smith Street and features a semicircular paved approach. The sloping lawn is dotted with trees and bordered by a hedge on Francis Street.

Since 1904 there have been a number of suggestions and subsequent changes in the streets and areas between the Capitol and Union Station, including those by J.H. Cady and E.R. Willson. The City Plan Commission proposed a plan in 1914 for improvement of the approach from Union Station. Some of the freight yards would be eliminated, a monument plaza would be created, some roads would be changed, and landscaping for a public garden would be provided (Cady 1959, 219). The plan however, was never implemented. Little has been done to improve the appearance of the land between these two structures until the present in spite of proposals by the City Plan Commission into the 1950s.

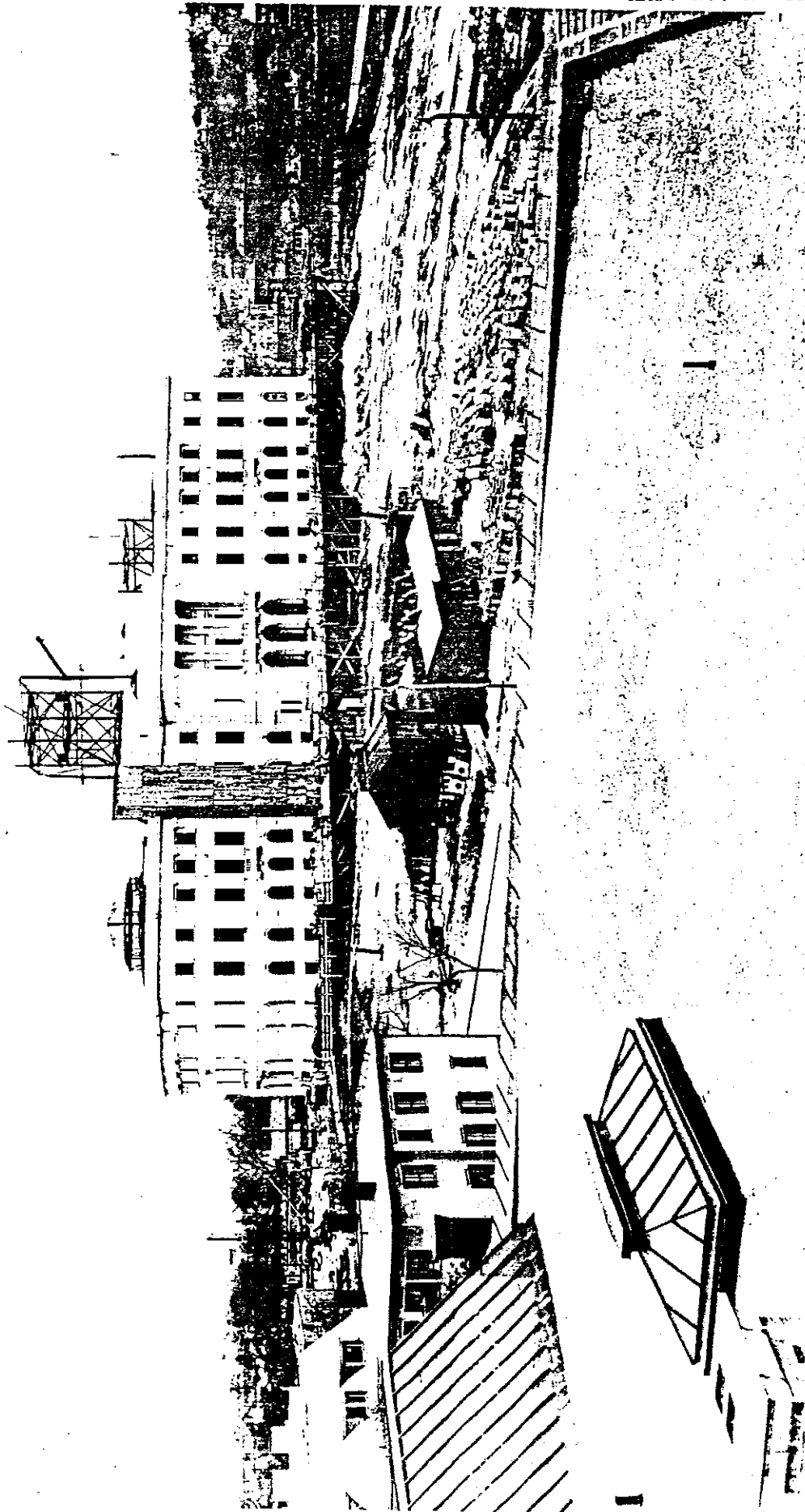


PREPARED BY THE
CITY PLAN COMMISSION
DEC - 1914
STUDY FOR TREATMENT OF
STREETS AND AREAS BETWEEN
CAPITOL AND UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, R. I.

Rhode Island State House
landscaping proposal, City
Plan Commission, 1914, for
area between Capitol and
Union Station.



Rhode Island State House. View to north. The State House was sited on Smith's Hill to symbolically enhance the structure's presence in the city. Photography by Jack Boucher, 1977 for HAER.



Rhode Island State House during construction, May 1898. View to north.



Rhode Island State House during construction; October 1898. View to northwest.